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1951

Growing and Selling The Camellia

It's easy—if you have the right kind of plant, the right kind of soil, the right kind of water, the right kind of weather, the right kind of salesmen . . . no trouble at all

By J. S. TORMEY

THERE HAS been so much disjointed misinformation in regard to camellias that it may be well to discuss the subject with a view to clearing up some of the misconceptions which have led to the belief that camellias are plants requiring more care than they really do, and that one must be some kind of wizard to do a good job of growing them. And, mind you, I said growing them, not producing them from the start. The production of camel-

J. S. Tormey, owner of Tormey's camellia ranges at Temple City, Cal., was recently called upon at a meeting of a group of his dealer-customers for an "off the cuff" discussion of camellias. Although Mr. Tormey's address was entirely extemporaneous, his remarks were a composite representation of many years' experience in camellia culture, and are particularly timely now when the trade is so concerned about the future of this plant. His talk, in abridged form, is presented here.

lias should be left to the one who starts them in the first place. Having the right start in life as given by a modern, progressive producer, a two-year old camellia plant can become a pleasure to "grow" by anyone.

If you want to grow camellias outdoors in the ground, you can be successful if the growing is done in sections of the country where temperatures are suitable. Camellias as a plant will stand below-freezing temperatures for a short time, but the flowers are ruined by freezing weather. In some dry, desert sections it will be difficult to succeed with camellias planted in the open if temperatures stay above those of milder sections for too long a period. Camellias are a sun-loving plant

after they get "old," but while young (under 20 years) they do not have a big enough "pipe line" (that is, the main stem or trunk) to bring up moisture from the bottom, nor do they have sufficient roots to replace the moisture evaporated by a full-day exposure to hot sun. So, until the pipe line gets big enough, which is usually several years, they should be planted where they will not get more sun than they can stand. The best method is a half-day exposure, without any mid-day, "straight down" sunshine striking the plants.

If you will provide proper drainage when planting a camellia, there is very little danger that you will overwater them. If you dig a hole in the ground where you want to set the plants out and fill it with water, you may determine whether the drainage is sufficient. The faster the seepage to empty the holes, the better the drainage.

If the hole is not empty of water within a couple of hours you will be trying to regulate the given amount of water each time, and this schedule is not only tedious but is impossible to maintain. Then, too, in winter the water will not drain off during periods of heavy rains. In short, it is better not to plant camellias at all if you can't provide the correct drainage. The answer is: Grow them in containers.

There are many kinds of materials and mixes, but I have not found anything better than a simple mix consisting of equal parts of peat moss, coarse sand or gravel and good sandy soil—nothing more. The density of the mix as outlined will provide excellent drainage, distribute moisture evenly and eliminate fussing with composts and resulting contamination. This mix is recommended for either ground or container growing.

Beware of the "magic fertilizers." Just feed during the spring and summer at about two-month intervals, using cotton seed meal or cas-

tor bean meal, about a teaspoonful for each gallon of soil surrounding the plant. The necessary amount can be estimated by visualizing a container which would hold the plant. The food should be simply scratched into the soil—the water will gradually carry it down.

I believe there is too much emphasis on pH. It has been proven by our chemist that plants grow well where the pH is anywhere between four and 6½.

We found out the hard way that the so-called acid foods are too varied in their formulas. It is simple for anyone to keep the soil at the right pH, slightly on the acid side, between 4½ and 6½, by making an occasional test and applying iron or aluminum sulphate in liquid form mixed with water.

Camellias can be grown in containers simply and satisfactorily regardless of climatic or geographical conditions. Some time ago I read an article which discussed growing camellias both outdoors and in the greenhouse. The article stated that the camellia is one flower which can be perfected in a cool greenhouse.

The camellia blooms naturally from October to May, depending on the variety, and is a short-day flower. There is no need to use black cloth at one season and electric lights another to change winter to summer and vice-versa. The camellia is a natural bloomer at the time of year when flowers bring their highest prices, and can be grown in a greenhouse that contains other stock during periods of freeze, thus tying up the greenhouse for only a short period. When the danger of freezing weather has passed, they can be removed from the greenhouse and placed in part-shade, such as that provided by a lath house, and left there until the freeze approaches again.

In considering containers, one thing must be remembered — clay pots are not suitable for camellias. When placed outdoors, they act as blotters and cause root drying and burning. Metal containers have proved to be the ideal thing for camellia plants. Drain holes, lots of them, on the sides of the container. If they are near the bottom, they will not get stopped up when the plant is set up on the ground. If the holes are of sufficient quantity, overwatering will be impossible. The mixture previously described, peat, sand and soil, should be used.

Many who have not succeeded

with camellias attribute it to mis-handling, when actually it is probably a result of lack of knowledge. In the first place, plants that have had the right start in life are the ones that will grow properly. Those grown from the start in containers will not suffer root damage caused by digging, as in the case of field or bed-grown plants. It is safe to buy plants grown in containers from the start. The plants should be two or more years old and, if of improved strains of good varieties, they will produce some flowers the following season.

Nurserymen and florists all over the country have overlooked the chance to make good profits by not having camellias available in containers. If placed outdoors in a protected place in partial shade most of the year, and then brought indoors to a well ventilated, light, cool porch, the plants will have better growing conditions than a permanent ground location will afford.

Let's consider another phase of potted camellia sales. Many thousands of azalea plants are sold during their season by florists. And they are sold in sections where they never could be grown outdoors and are difficult to grow at all indoors. They are sold as "living bouquets," to be kept for a short time and then thrown away after blooming.

Doesn't it seem logical that the camellia, if properly brought to the public's attention, could be sold even to people who would not be expecting any more from it than they would from the azalea plant? It seems apparent that we are doing a poor job of merchandising as compared to other industries.

By following a few simple instructions, which are much less complicated than those usually given for the most common plants, the nurseryman can popularize the camellia to an extent never dreamed of. Nurserymen located in the East know that the common geranium is pampered and fussed over by thousands of people living in flats and apartments—let's get out and make something of our own business.

There was a time when I was in the retail camellia business, and it was very profitable, too. I hadn't mastered the handling of camellias, and we issued such detailed instructions and gave such involved answers to questions put to us by our patrons that we turned many a "sure" buyer into a think-it-over prospect. All he could see was that

the camellia would be more of a worry than a pleasure.

If I were planning to do any retail selling today, I would start off right by telling customers how simple it is to grow camellias. They would merely be told to water, light, feed and locate the plants properly.

In short, I'd tell them the simple truth, that camellias require little if any special attention that is not given to other plants.

There are, of course, problems that arise with camellias as with any growing thing. Watering, for example. We drench tens of thousands of plants every day, two thousand gallons of water per acre all overhead. We have yet to see that "burning glass" that the "experts" talk about, but we do know that underwatered plants suffer and the foliage burns.

With regard to the finished product, it must be remembered that camellias grown outdoors in containers, even in mild climates, must be put under glass during the winter if perfection of blooms for corsage work is desired. Plants set outdoors or permanently grown outdoors produce lots of flowers, but few of them will be perfect enough to meet the rigid requirements of commercial use. Blooms whipped by wind and rain become damaged and spotted.

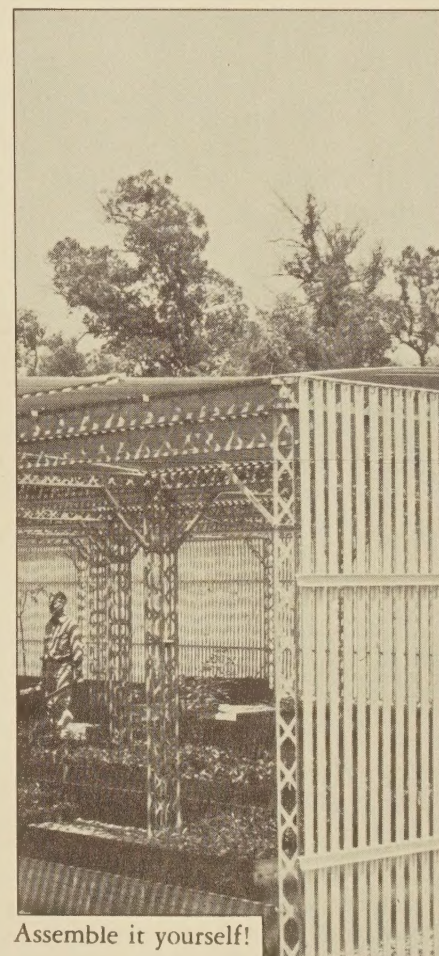
As a rule, camellia blooms are taken without any stem, and the leaves are taken separately for the tailoring of the corsage or other uses. The camellia used in corsage work is usually stemmed with wire and wrapped with tape. Gardenia collars use stapled leaves. In this connection, let me point out that even if a camellia plant never bloomed at all, it would still be profitable to have around for it supplies the finest of foliage for floral work. The foliage stays put and is leather-tough. Grown cool with plenty of fresh air, the camellia will ship well and last as long as an orchid if properly placed in storage boxes.

In closing, I want to stress the importance of being sure to get the right kind of plant. There is a lot of difference between the plant grown under ordinary methods and that grown by a progressive, modern grower. Many failures with camellias are caused by so-called "die back," which is supposedly a natural disease affecting camellias. It's a disease produced by inefficient methods of handling.

Following a practice established by custom, that of growing the plants first in beds or in the open

field, and then digging at the time of sale, is dangerous. It is practically impossible to economically dig the plants without root cutting or other injury and exposure to the elements. Camellias do not tolerate root disturbance of this nature. Plants dug from a field must be nursed along for a couple of years before they get back on their feet.

This permanently weakened plant never has a chance to live to the ripe old age it deserves. It has suffered a major operation, and the old wounds caused by the digging have taken their toll. Some of us run better "plant hospitals" than others, and we are better nurses to the plants. But how much better things would be if we had the right kind of plants in the first place. Such plants—grown from the start in containers, produced from the finest of parent stock, plants that require nothing more than the simple care as outlined — can change your entire conception of what a camellia plant can and should be, and what a pleasure it can be not only to you but to your customers as well.



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